

Work-Family Conflict and Family Role Performance Among Collegiate Athletic Trainers

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Context: Work-life balance continues to be a focal point of athletic training research, particularly due to the job challenges and demands of health care providers. Despite a large body of literature, much is still unexplored, especially in the area of family role performance (FRP).

Objective: To examine the relationships between work-family conflict (WFC), FRP, and various demographic variables among athletic trainers employed in the collegiate setting.

Design: Cross-sectional online survey.

Setting: Collegiate setting.

Patients or Other Participants: A total of 586 collegiate athletic trainers (females = 374, males = 210, sex variant or nonconforming = 1, preferred not to answer = 1).

Main Outcome Measure(s): Data were collected through an online survey (Qualtrics) in which participants responded to demographic questions and previously validated WFC and FRP scales. Demographic data were reported and analyzed for descriptive information and frequencies. Mann-Whitney U tests were performed to identify differences among groups.

Results: Participants' mean scores were 28.19 ± 6.01 and 45.86 ± 11.55 for the FRP and WFC scales, respectively.

Mann-Whitney U tests revealed differences between men and women for WFC scores ($U = 344667$, $P = .021$). The FRP score was moderately negatively correlated with the WFC total score ($r[584] = -0.497$, $P < .001$) and predicted the WFC score ($b = 72.02$, $t_{582} = -13.30$, $P = .001$). The Mann-Whitney U test demonstrated that married athletic trainers (47.20 ± 11.92) had higher WFC scores than those who were not married (43.48 ± 11.78 ; $U = 19847.00$, $P = .003$). Mann-Whitney U analysis ($U = 32096.00$, $P = .001$) also revealed a difference between collegiate athletic trainers with children (48.16 ± 12.44) and those without children (44.68 ± 10.90).

Conclusions: Collegiate athletic trainers experienced more WFC with marriage and having children. We propose that the time required to raise a family and build relationships may cause WFC due to time incongruencies. Athletic trainers want to be able to spend time with their families; however, when such time is highly limited, then WFC increases.

Key Words: professional role, family performance, work-life interface, parenthood

Key Points

- Collegiate athletic trainers who were married or had children reported more work-family conflict (WFC) than those who were single or did not have children.
- Male collegiate athletic trainers described higher levels of WFC than female athletic trainers, even though male and female athletic trainers worked comparable weekly hours.
- Family role performance predicted WFC among collegiate athletic trainers; as athletic trainers were unable to engage in family role activities, they experienced WFC.

Well before the COVID-19 global pandemic, athletic trainers (ATs) were faced with challenges in balancing their professional and personal lives.^{1,2} However, the pandemic catapulted the topic of work-family conflict (WFC) into the spotlight for all professionals but especially for those working in health care. Health care providers were faced with increased work demands, hours, and workplace health hazards on top of caring for and providing a safe environment for their patients. *Work-family conflict* is described as an incongruence between one's time and energies when engaging in work as well as other multiple life roles. Experiences of WFC are individualized to each person's life paradigm; yet these factors

are consistent among several core variables, including organizational, individual, and sociocultural aspects.^{3,4}

Organizational variables are rooted in the time commitment required of one's job and other expectations associated with the role the individual assumes in the organization. Researchers have focused largely on organizational factors. For ATs, the time demands associated with their roles in the collegiate setting have been reported as challenging and linked to WFC.^{2,5,6} Time-based conflict is most common among ATs; the long working hours, which often extend into the night and weekend, can reduce time available for their other life roles.^{1,2,5} The topic of WFC has been studied exhaustively within sport contexts, largely due to the characterization of these environments as demanding,

greedy, and all consuming.^{4,6} The collegiate setting receives considerable attention among scholars because it is one of the larger employment settings for ATs and has been depicted as time intensive.⁷⁻⁹ Additionally, the setting itself has been shown to create job incongruence for ATs, which can reduce their quality of life.¹⁰

Individual and sociocultural aspects can influence WFC. Although gender has been considered a mediating factor for experiences of WFC, evidence to support this claim is lacking.¹¹ Both male and female ATs experience WFC; however, societal gender norms can influence perceptions of conflict, as well as sources leading to conflict for ATs.^{3,4,12} Female ATs have identified higher levels of stress and burnout despite working fewer hours than male ATs.¹³ Perceptually, the increased stress levels among women come from balancing working full time while assuming other roles outside the workplace, including parenting and maintaining the household.^{14,15} Parenthood is challenging for the ATs, as both roles require time and energy that can be draining.¹ Those ATs who were parents experienced WFC and guilt, as they valued AT and parenting roles equally.¹⁶ This finding suggests that professional identity and family role performance (FRP) can lead to experiences of conflict. Conceptually, FRP is a construct that addresses an individual's fulfillment of certain family roles in 2 main areas: (1) task-oriented functions and (2) relationship-based functions.

Family role performance describes how an individual functions within the family domain and has been researched along with WFC, but it has yet to be studied in athletic training.^{17,18} Gender differences in FRP have not been identified.^{17,18} However, gender differences have been reported in WFC.¹⁹ This led to the interest in gender differences in FRP. We are also aware that experiences of work-family guilt can predict WFC among ATs.¹ Work-family guilt, although not a focus of our study, occurs as result of an emotional response to missing out on family obligations or events. It is therefore possible that ATs who are not able to participate as they might want to in their nonwork roles could also experience WFC.

Work-family conflict has been shown among both married and unmarried ATs, as well as those who do or do not have children,¹ perhaps suggesting that various life roles can affect experiences of WFC for ATs. Plausibly, an AT's desire to engage in family life, which can include domestic chores, household tasks, and care of others (eg, children, spouse, aging parents), can predict experiences of WFC. One unexplored area in athletic training is the part one's FRP plays in experiences of WFC. The fulfillment of expectations and desire to participate in the family role are referred to as FRP and engagement.²⁰ The purpose of this research, therefore, was to expand our understanding of the work-family relationship, particularly as it relates to an individual's conceptualization of his or her performance in family and professional roles. Specifically, we wanted to better determine how one's FRP can affect experiences of WFC. We predicted that

1. Female collegiate ATs would have higher WFC mean scores than male collegiate ATs (hypothesis 1 [H1]).
2. Female collegiate ATs would describe higher levels of FRP than male collegiate ATs (H2).
3. Higher reported levels of FRP would predict experiences of WFC (H3).

4. Collegiate ATs with children would have higher FRP scores than those without children (H4).
5. Collegiate ATs who were married would report higher levels of WFC than those who were single (H5).
6. Collegiate ATs with children would indicate higher levels of WFC than those without children (H6).

METHODS

Research Design

We used a cross-sectional online survey via Qualtrics to gather data on collegiate ATs' FRP and WFC. The scale items selected for this study have been established as valid, reliable questionnaires, and thus, none of the scales were modified. Additional demographic information collected included average work hours, National Athletic Trainers' Association district, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) division level, and years of certification. The WFC scale has been commonly used in the athletic training profession.^{1,5,21} The FRP scale has been proven valid but not yet used in athletic training. Institutional review board approval was granted before recruitment and data collection.

Participants

We developed a list of all colleges and universities offering NCAA athletic programs (Division I [D1] = 351, D2 = 307, D3 = 442). With that list, we examined each sports medicine department directory to create a contact email list for all ATs employed in the collegiate setting. We emailed invitations to 6110 ATs employed in the collegiate setting during the fall of 2020, yielding 757 responses (12% response rate). Responses were reviewed for inclusion criteria (clinically working $\geq 50\%$ of working hours) and completion of all sections of the survey, and 586 responses remained for data analysis (77% completion rate).

Instrumentation

The survey contained 3 main sections: (1) demographic information, (2) the WFC scale, and (3) the FRP scale. Validity scores for each scale are provided in Table 1. The demographic portion of the survey consisted of several categories: age, sex, ethnicity, marital status, district affiliation, and school division. Questions were also included about the organizational structure of the AT's setting, employment status, number of additional ATs, and department model.

Work-Family Conflict

Work-family conflict was measured via an 18-item questionnaire that addresses time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based conflict.²² The scale also includes 2 sub-components that measure the bidirectional nature of the conflict: work interfering with family and family interfering with work conflict. Participants are asked to rate the WFC scale items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The scores are summed to create a total score; a higher cumulative score on the scale indicates a higher level of WFC. The range of the WFC scale is 18 to 90. Sample items from the validated scale are "*The time I must devote to my job keeps me from participating equally in household responsibilities and activities*," "*I am often so*

Table 1. Validity of Survey Scales, α

Scale Item	Previously Validated	Our Scale
Work-family conflict	0.78–0.87 ^a	0.887
Family role performance	0.70–0.91 ^b	0.888

^a Mazerolle et al.²¹ and Carlson et al.²²^b Gieter et al.¹⁷

emotionally drained when I get home from work that it prevents me from contributing to my family,” and “The problem-solving behaviors I use in my job are not effective in resolving problems at home.”

Family Role Performance

The FRP scale developed and validated by Chen et al.²⁰ was used to better understand an AT’s level of involvement in the family domain. The scale consists of 2 subscales: task-oriented (4 items) and relationship-oriented (4 items) FRP for a total of 8 questions. Respondents are asked to rate the extent to which they fulfill family responsibilities. All scale items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = *did not fulfill expectations* to 5 = *fulfilled expectations completely*. The FRP scale range is 8 to 40. We found the scale to be reliable in the current population ($\alpha = 0.887$). Sample items are “*Completed household responsibilities*” (task) and “*Provided emotional support to my family members*” (relationship).

Data-Collection Procedures

We sent all potential recruits an invitation email outlining the study’s purpose, requirements for participation, and the link to the survey (Qualtrics). Participants read the terms of the survey and consented to the study before continuing to the survey questions. After agreeing to be involved, individuals were asked 2 screening questions: (1) Do at least 50% of your job responsibilities involve practicing clinically as an athletic trainer? and (2) Are you currently employed in the collegiate setting? We included these specific questions to ensure that the research aims could be met, as our focus was on the collegiate ATs who provide direct medical and patient care. Participants who did not qualify for the study were directed to the end of the survey and thanked for their time. Those who qualified then began the survey. Our initial email was sent in the fall of 2020, with 1-week and 3-week reminders. Once all data collection was completed, the data were uploaded to SPSS (version 24.0; IBM Corp) on a secure, private platform to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Data Analysis

The a priori level was set at $P = .05$ before data analysis. The demographic data were reported via means, frequencies, SDs, and percentages. Similarly, the WFC and FRP scores were described using means and SDs. Data collected in this study were nonparametric.

We analyzed the WFC and FRP scale results using the total scores; the subscale findings were not analyzed in this study. Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to determine any differences in WFC and FRP scores for female versus male collegiate ATs and for those with versus those without children. We calculated a Spearman test to learn if the FRP and WFC scores were correlated. Lastly, a linear regression

analysis was performed to identify if the FRP score predicted the WFC score.

RESULTS

All participants were ATs employed in the collegiate setting ($n = 586$). Their average age was 33 ± 7 years (range = 21–70 years), and they had 10 ± 8 years of experience (range = 0–45 years) in the athletic training field. Most respondents (66.0%, $n = 387$) did not have children, 1.87% ($n = 11$) were pregnant at the time of completing the questionnaire, 10.6% ($n = 62$) had 1 child, and the rest (23.2%, $n = 136$) had 2+ children (range = 2–5 children). Demographic data are provided in Table 2.

The WFC and FRP Scores

The average scores were 28.19 ± 6.01 on the FRP scale and 45.86 ± 11.55 on the WFC scale. Reported hours per week worked in season were 60.00 ± 11.80 by male ATs and 58.90 ± 11.80 by female ATs, indicating no difference ($P = .309$).

Gender and WFC and FRP Scores

The WFC scores differed by gender ($U = 344667$, $P = .021$). Female ATs described lower levels of WFC (45.09 ± 11.23) than male ATs (47.12 ± 12.00), disproving our first hypothesis.

On the FRP scale, female ATs scored 28.27 ± 6.06 versus 28.09 ± 6.00 for the male ATs, reflecting no difference. Therefore, we rejected our second hypothesis.

Predicting the WFC Score From the FRP Score

The FRP score was moderately negatively correlated with the WFC score ($r_{s[584]} = -0.497$, $P < .001$). The FRP score predicted the WFC score ($b = 72.02$, $t_{582} = -13.30$, $P = .001$). A significant regression equation was generated ($F_{1583} = 177.24$), with an R^2 of 0.233, and FRP total score was used to predict WFC total score. These results confirmed our third hypothesis.

The WFC and FRP Scores and Marital and Family Status

Athletic trainers with children had an FRP score of 28.91 ± 5.57 compared with 27.82 ± 6.19 for those without children. No difference ($P = .069$) was found, refuting our fourth hypothesis.

Collegiate ATs who were married reported a higher mean WFC score (47.20 ± 11.92) than those who were not married (43.48 ± 11.78). We concluded that married ATs had higher WFC scores ($U = 19847.00$, $P = .003$) than those who were not married. Hypothesis 5 was confirmed.

Collegiate ATs with children had a higher WFC score (48.16 ± 12.44) than those without children (44.68 ± 10.90). The scores were different ($U = 32096.00$, $P = .001$), and hypothesis 6 was endorsed.

DISCUSSION

Although the literature^{1,3,8–11} is rich regarding work-life balance for the AT, much is left to learn about factors contributing to it. Our focus on the collegiate setting was

Table 2. Demographic Data

Characteristic	Frequency No. (%)
Gender	
Male	210 (35.8)
Female	374 (63.8)
Gender variant or nonconforming	1 (0.2)
Prefer not to answer	1 (0.2)
Marital status	
Single	189 (32.3)
In a relationship	111 (18.9)
Engaged	19 (3.2)
In a domestic relationship	3 (0.5)
Married	252 (43.0)
Separated	2 (0.3)
Divorced	7 (1.2)
Widowed	2 (0.3)
Missing	1 (0.2)
Children	
0	387 (66.0)
1	62 (10.6)
2	85 (14.5)
3	28 (4.8)
4	10 (1.7)
5	1 (0.2)
Currently pregnant	11 (1.9)
1 child and pregnant	2 (0.3)

purposeful, as it still is one of the largest employment settings for the AT and is considered a demanding work environment that can contribute to WFC.^{4,5} We chose to examine FRP, as no researchers in athletic training have assessed ATs' desire and ability to participate in their family life and how that may influence WFC. We found that 23% of the variance in WFC was explained by FRP, which is a construct that speaks to an individual's responsibilities to the family role (eg, parent, partner, or household manager).^{23–25} Our results showcase that engaging in various family functions as well as domestic and household chores may cause WFC. Work and family are intertwined domains and not truly discrete in nature. Often, they influence one another, and our outcomes confirm that the spillover can have a negative effect.

Similar to previous authors,^{1,3,5} we observed no difference in the hours worked per week between female and male ATs; as previously reported, collegiate ATs acknowledged working almost 60 hours per week during peak seasons. Time-based WFC continues to be the primary basis for negative experiences among ATs,^{1,5} especially those working in the professional sport setting or collegiate setting.^{1,3,4} Our findings were expected, in terms of the hours noted by our sample; however, until this study, collegiate male and female ATs often described similar levels of WFC.⁵ Greater levels of WFC in men is novel to the field of athletic training and warrants continued research.

Gender, WFC, and FRP

Despite anecdotal reports that women were more prone to WFC, little evidence has shown that women experienced more conflict than men.²⁶ Yet women identified feelings of guilt, burnout, and conflict while working in the collegiate setting, due in large part to their personal belief systems, which created an internal struggle to be available for both their professional and personal lives without sacrificing either role.^{3,13,27,28} We postulated that female ATs would

encounter more conflict working in the collegiate setting, but in fact, men expressed more conflict in our sample. This is the first time, to our knowledge, that researchers have reported these gender differences, as well as that men and women worked comparable hours per week. We believe this finding is powerful, as it demonstrates a possible shift in societal and individual expectations related to a father's role within the family domain. Or perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic influenced men's experiences of WFC. We did not analyze ATs' positions, but based on a prior investigation,² male ATs have historically held higher-level positions in the work setting than their female counterparts. This difference, too, may contribute to a higher level of WFC for men if their work demands are greater despite similar work hours.

In one study, Naugle et al¹³ determined that men worked more hours than women, unlike in our sample, whereas women reported higher levels of burnout. We found no differences in hours worked or FRP scores between male and female ATs; yet males endorsed higher levels of WFC. This result contrasts with the athletic training literature that dates back to 2008,⁵ when no differences were present between men and women in their WFC scores. Drawing on societal classifications of gender roles, we note that men often identify as the breadwinner and, thus, although they want to participate in family life, they are less affected when unable to attend to family obligations.^{29,30} Perhaps our outcomes showcase the shift in gender roles and values placed on parenting while working. Our data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, so our results feasibly speak to the effect the pandemic may have had on our sample's experiences with WFC. This shift in experiences of WFC for men requires more research. Our male and female participants exhibited comparable FRP, which indicates that both men and women were involved in family or home life. That balance could explain the lower levels of WFC experienced by our female ATs due to an increase in spousal support.¹²

Stereotypically, women have been idealized as the caretakers of the family, so we were surprised that men and women did not differ in FRP.²⁹ This finding indicates that men are taking on more responsibility at home and have a true desire to participate in the family role. Cinamon and Rich³¹ developed a profile of the working professional, suggesting 3 distinct groups: (1) dual profile, with the individual placing equal importance on work and family roles; (2) work profile, with the individual placing higher emphasis on the work role; and (3) family profile, with the individual attributing greater importance to the family role. Drawing upon this model, we propose here that ATs fit the dual profile and experience WFC because they find value in and place importance on both roles equally. Supporting this supposition, Singe et al³² highlighted the experiences of ATs who were working full time and balancing parenting duties; they struggled with work-family guilt and WFC due to placing high value on both roles.

Our results also support the reprioritizing of family time for men and redefined attitudes about the gender roles society considers to be fulfilled by men versus women. Despite still serving as breadwinners for their families, more men are participating in household chores, parenting, and caring for their families than 30 years ago.³³ We recognize that additional research is warranted, particularly through a qualitative lens that explores why our sample of

men experienced greater levels of conflict, as this was not fully expected as a finding or explained by our results.

Marriage, Family, and WFC

Gender, employment setting, and marital status often do not predict experiences of WFC, but those ATs with children described more struggles and conflict than those without children.^{3,5,26,34,35} Our ATs with children expressed more WFC than those without. Thus, parenting responsibilities are demanding and, when coupled with working in the collegiate setting, can lead to higher levels of WFC. Recent investigators³² observed that ATs working clinically experienced guilt and WFC due to their parenting roles and full-time jobs. The time demands of both parenting and athletic training are incongruent, as they do not allow the AT to spend enough time parenting due to the demands of the collegiate setting. However, among our participants, ATs who were married also felt greater levels of conflict than those who were single or unmarried. Before this study, researchers^{5,26,36} had not found differences between married and unmarried ATs. This information implies that, for our sample, marriage did create greater levels of WFC, which has several implications but foremost that our ATs perceived conflicts as likely because of the limited time available to spend with their spouses. We know that high work demands, like those experienced by ATs, strain personal relationships, as they often come at the expense of these relationships.

For the AT who is married and working full time, devoting the necessary time and energy to develop and maintain quality relationships can be challenging and lead to conflicts. Moreover, our results illustrated that ATs wanted to engage in the family domain (eg, chores, parenting, and care of family members), and when this involvement was reduced, conflict occurred. Until our study, wanting to be engaged more in the family or personal domain was thought to be important to the AT and a basis for conflicts. Now we understand that family values, an individual factor in the work-life balance paradigm, influence experiences of WFC for the AT.^{3,37} This also demonstrates that ATs want an adaptive lifestyle in which they can engage in paid work but also contribute to their family and home lives.³⁸ Although originally a theory rooted in the feminist framework, it appears to now describe individuals overall with respect to their preference for an overall lifestyle. An adaptive lifestyle places value on both work and family and suggests that they are equally important to the person.³¹

Future Direction and Limitations

Our sample consisted of ATs in collegiate settings offering NCAA division athletics, meaning that these results may be applicable only to those ATs employed in the NCAA D1 through D3 setting and not to those outside this setting (eg, National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, high school, or professional sports). Regarding family values, it is also important to acknowledge the differences in family roles and values that persist across different cultures and not just those between genders.

We collected data during the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have affected the results. Future authors should examine the same constructs to see if perhaps the COVID-19 pandemic did influence our findings. During the first 6 months, parents and working professionals were forced to balance working from home and online schooling,

which certainly might have affected the outcomes. These results could help us learn effective ways to manage work and family and life roles.

Future researchers should explore WFC and family role values in other common athletic training environments outside the demographics of this study, including the professional sports and high school settings. Evaluating ATs in these other settings can provide a broader perspective as to family roles and professional identity and how they interact in experiences of WFC for ATs. Lastly, we used a cross-sectional online survey, meaning that the results reflect those who chose to respond at that time and not necessarily all collegiate ATs all the time. For the future, investigators should take a more in-depth approach, such as a longitudinal method, to look at the WFC and FRP experiences of collegiate ATs over time as responsibilities at work and at home change.

CONCLUSIONS

Athletic trainers are still experiencing challenges regarding WFC. Men experienced higher levels of WFC than women, despite working similar hours per week, which may indicate a societal shift in expectations of a man's role in the family domain. Female ATs reported similar levels of FRP and less WFC than their male counterparts, indicating either the development of strategies for navigating the work-life interface or accepting the lifestyle that comes with being a full-time AT. Married ATs experienced more WFC, which is a new finding that demonstrates the need for sufficient time and energy to develop and maintain quality relationships.

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